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The Moment of "Three Women Eating": Completing the Story of You Have Seen Their Faces

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VOLUME XXIX · 1994

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The Moment of “Three Women Eating”: Completing the Story of *You Have Seen Their Faces*

BY ROBERT L. McDONALD

IN 1936 Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White merged their respective talents to produce one of the great documents of Depression-era America, the photo-text study *You Have Seen Their Faces*. There have been several accounts of the circumstances under which Caldwell and Bourke-White agreed to collaborate on this project, including their own autobiographical recollections.¹ Missing from each of these accounts, however, is any mention of an early goodwill gesture from Bourke-White that must have finally convinced a dubious Caldwell that he had indeed found a partner capable of understanding what he wanted this new book to be, and a photographer capable of imaging its spirit.

By 1936, of course, Bourke-White was highly respected as one of America's foremost industrial and commercial photographers. In 1929 Henry Luce had recruited her as the first staff photographer for *Fortune*, and during the next few years, at home and abroad, her advertising work and photo essays on iron- and steelworks, meat

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1. For interpretive accounts, see Harvey Klevar, *Erskine Caldwell: A Biography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 169–91; Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 161–71; and William Howard, “Dear Kit, Dear Skinny: The Letters of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White,” *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 23 (Fall 1988): 23–28. Caldwell wrote two autobiographies: *Call It Experience* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1951) and *With All My Might* (Atlanta: Peachtree, 1987); Bourke-White's autobiography is entitled *Portrait of Myself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

processing plants, construction sites, the automobile industry, and the like defined and celebrated the age of the machine. She was, as she would recall, “rapturous[ly]” drawn “to the beauty of industrial shapes.”² Given Bourke-White’s stature and the mood of the nation, it was no surprise in 1936 when Luce selected her now-famous photograph of Montana’s spectacular New Deal work project, the colossal Fort Peck Dam, for the first cover of his newest publication, simply titled *Life*.

Two years earlier, however, while covering the Dust Bowl drought of 1934 for *Fortune*, Bourke-White had begun something of an artistic awakening. From the Dakotas southward to Texas, she remarked upon faces engraved with the very paralysis of despair:

I had never seen people caught helpless like this in total tragedy. They had no defense. They had no plan. They were numbed like their own dumb animals, and many of these animals were choking and dying in drifting soil. I was deeply moved by the suffering I saw and touched particularly by the bewilderment of the farmers. I think this was the beginning of my awareness of people in a human, sympathetic sense as subject for the camera . . .³

Back in her studio, Bourke-White understandably found it difficult to resume her usual work, especially the inane advertising assignments she found herself compelled to accept in order to pay ever-mounting bills.

One afternoon, while setting up a routine tire advertisement for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Bourke-White says she experienced the epiphany of her young career. As usual, the assignment was to make her photographs “capture the very soul of the tire, its footprints on the sands of time”—but to do so not by photographing the tire itself, but by photographing the “plump” loveliness of a handmade rubber dummy-tire and the deep, perfect impressions made by a specially carved wooden track-maker. The photographer’s assistant made what Bourke-White then and later considered “a

2. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 110.

3. *Ibid.*, 110.

courageous and revolutionary proposal”: “Let’s photograph a real tire.” Suddenly she was struck by the absurdity of this work. She recognized this incident as “the turning point” of her career, and she longed for a world “where things did not have to look convincing, they just had to be true.”⁴

Bourke-White committed herself, then, to her redefined purpose—a purpose that merged the political with the professional and the personal. Responsibility became her theme. As she wrote in a 1936 piece for *The Nation*, “Photographing This World”:

As echoes of the old debate—is photography an art?—die away, a new and infinitely more important question arises. To what extent are photographers becoming aware of the social scene and how significantly are their photographs portraying it? . . . The major control is the photographer’s point of view. How alive is he? Does he know what is happening in the world? How sensitive has he become during the course of his own photographic development to the world-shaking changes in the social scene about him?⁵

These were hard questions, and ones that she had only recently found a voice to articulate and the conviction to answer for herself.

Perhaps Bourke-White’s most effective vehicle for passing into this new phase of her career was the unlikely figure of Erskine Caldwell, the Georgia-born writer who, following roughly the same pattern as Bourke-White, had published his first story in 1929 and now, in 1936, found himself at a crossroads. Early in his career Caldwell had committed himself to a precise goal. With no “philosophical truths to dispense, no evangelistic urge to change the course of human destiny,” he nevertheless wanted “to be a writer of fiction that revealed with all my might the inner spirit of men and women as they responded to the joys of life and reacted to the sorrows of existence.”⁶ To date, his best successes in working to-

4. Ibid., III, 112.

5. Quoted in Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 156–57.

6. Caldwell, *Call It Experience*, 132; *With All My Might*, 330. Similarly, in his (unsuccessful) 1931 application for a Guggenheim fellowship, when he was planning *God’s Little Acre*, Caldwell claimed realism as his mode: “There has already

ward this end had been three volumes of superb short fiction and his stark, shocking novels of debauchery and despair in the poverty-stricken, rural South, *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933).

Caldwell had, however, attracted some severe criticism for his portrayals of Southerners, especially for what his critics cited as unfair distortions and exaggerations of life among the region's tenant farmers. On the floor of the United States House of Representatives, Georgia Congressman Braswell Deen denounced Caldwell and his "fiction," censuring the enormously popular dramatic version of *Tobacco Road* as a "most infamous, wicked and damnable play."⁷ Newspaper editors across the South—examples of a class Caldwell derided as "the professional Southerner"⁸—lambasted him for creating characters such as Jeeter Lester and Ty Ty Walden, branding him as yet another native son who had sold out his homeland for Yankee dollars and attention during an age when, as Malcolm Cowley has described it, American writers were being swept along in "a daydream of revolutionary brotherhood."⁹

While all writers are subject to various critical tempers, the kind of criticism he received was particularly unpalatable for Caldwell, who saw himself, unpretentiously, as a storyteller.¹⁰ His detractors were calling lies the stories he always maintained were artistic truths, "inventions" shaped by his creative powers so that they conveyed "the forceful illusion of [life]." There was nothing, Cald-

been too much of 'romance,' of 'magnolia blossoms,' of 'Negro dialect'; it is time someone really wrote about 'life.' I should like to have the leisure, the funds and the time to try to let 'the poor whites,' 'the white trash,' and 'the lint-heads' present a different picture." Application, 21 July 1931, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Archives.

7. "'Tobacco Road' Winds Its Way into Congress," New York *Herald Tribune*, 7 April 1936, 14.

8. Erskine Caldwell, "Tobacco Roads in the South," *New Leader*, 13 June 1936, 4.

9. Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s* (New York: Penguin, 1981), xxii.

10. Jac Tharpe, "Interview with Erskine Caldwell," in *Conversations with Erskine Caldwell*, ed. Edwin T. Arnold (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 142.

well emphatically declared, sensationalized about his material, and his only interest in “revolution” was maybe an impulse to “shame” us all into acknowledging some of the less-discussed aspects of contemporary Southern “civilization,” or life among the denizens of Tobacco Road.¹¹

Musing on all this, Caldwell took some time deciding what to do in defense of his art—and himself. In 1935 he had contributed to the New York *Post* a four-part exposé of sharecropper life in Georgia, which had caused such an uproar that the Augusta [Georgia] *Chronicle* launched its own investigation to weigh against Caldwell’s portrait.¹² But by April 1936, after a fair consideration of all the “ideas for books . . . clamoring for attention,” a still determined Caldwell had settled on a more substantial rebuttal. He had formulated a project that he felt must take precedence over any others, a work that would by design “vindicate [his] writings about the South.” He imagined it would be “a factual study of people in the cotton states living in economic stress,” written with the specific “intention to show that my fiction was as realistic as life itself in the contemporary South.” And “[t]he title of the book,” he recalls in *With All My Might*, “had already been selected. It was to be called *You Have Seen Their Faces*.”¹³

Documentary literature of the kind Caldwell envisioned remains among the most accessible and interesting work produced during the 1930s, when the fiction of proletarian writers—like Josephine Johnson, Clara Weatherwax, Edward Dahlberg, or even Jack Conroy—fired emotions en masse, but too briefly to be remembered. Documentaries, on the other hand, retain their power because, in part, of their generic intent: to reveal what James Agee once called “a portion of unimagined existence.”¹⁴ And this, Caldwell knew, words alone could not accomplish. If the book were to have the

11. Caldwell, *With All My Might*, 96; “Tobacco Roads in the South,” 4.

12. The primary articles and an excellent sampling of the responses they elicited are reprinted in Scott MacDonald, ed., *Critical Essays on Erskine Caldwell* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 97–152.

13. Caldwell, *Call It Experience*, 163; *With All My Might*, 145.

14. Quoted in William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 47.

impact he imagined, if it were to be “authentic,” he knew it would have to be his first collaborative work: it “would have to be thoroughly documented with photographs taken on the scene by a perceptive photographer.”¹⁵

Thus the opening for Margaret Bourke-White, who was casting about for some serious, book-length project that would begin to satisfy her “great need to understand my fellow Americans better”—a job that would extend her own “aliveness” as it revealed to her native “worlds about which I knew almost nothing.” Bourke-White felt it was “a miracle” that she happened “to hear of an author in search of a photographer . . . someone with receptivity and an open mind, someone who would be as interested as he was in American people, everyday people.” It was Caldwell, “a writer whose work,” Bourke-White thought, “had extraordinary vitality, an almost savage power”; it was he who “wanted to take the camera to Tobacco Road.”¹⁶

Vicki Goldberg explains that the photographer, with her typical bravura, proposed the association: “At a cocktail party in January of ’36, she swooped down excitedly on Maxim Lieber, Erskine Caldwell’s agent, to say how much she’d like to meet the author and work with him.” Soon, Goldberg summarizes, the two artists “met and agreed to join their talents to a cause,”¹⁷ an account which roughly matches Caldwell’s own. In his first autobiography, *Call It Experience*, he says that Lieber arranged a meeting with Bourke-White, whom Caldwell found “a spirited woman with an engaging personality” and who he knew “had published a highly regarded volume of industrial photographs” as well as “a volume of photographs of Russian industrial and agricultural operations.” Caldwell concludes his account, though, with the too-simple recollection that “Margaret agreed to take the pictures for the book.”¹⁸ In fact, items in the Erskine Caldwell Collection at Syracuse, as well as Bourke-White’s and Caldwell’s later accounts, all indicate that

15. Caldwell, *With All My Might*, 145.

16. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 113.

17. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 161, 162.

18. Caldwell, *Call It Experience*, 163.

Bourke-White did not so much “agree to take the pictures” as she found herself—then perhaps the most famous photographer in the world—pleading her abilities for the chance to work on the project.

Caldwell, it seems, had at least two objections to accepting Bourke-White as his collaborator. In *With All My Might* he implies that his foremost objection was to her gender: “I was not fully convinced that the work I had in mind would be suitable for a female photographer to perform.” What exactly he meant by “suitable” is unclear, unless the word reflected a genteel (and sexist) presumption that a woman couldn’t or shouldn’t be interested in participating in a six- to eight-week trek across the Deep South during a sweltering post-drought July. Caldwell was very wrong on this point, however. Although he would later admit that nothing of the experience “daunted [her] spirits,” he had initially underestimated the stamina and resolve of a woman with a résumé like that of Margaret Bourke-White.¹⁹

The most interesting reason for Caldwell’s objection to Bourke-White, though, had nothing to do with her sex and everything to do with his perception of her as an artist. For he was determined to employ what he called “a perceptive photographer” who could “show that my fiction was as realistic as life itself in the contemporary South.”²⁰ Based on his knowledge of the work that had made her famous, Caldwell seemed predisposed to believe that Bourke-White was neither terribly perceptive nor up to capturing the “life” of anything human. Again, he knew her only as a respected photographer of “industrial machines” and “Russian industrial and agricultural operations.”

Apparently, in their earliest conversations Max Lieber had confided in Bourke-White something of Caldwell’s opinion of her

19. Caldwell, *With All My Might*, 145. In his biography of Caldwell, Klevar reports another possible concern over Bourke-White’s gender: rumors that she “was not to be trusted around married men” (p. 172).

20. Caldwell, *With All My Might*, 145. Sylvia Jenkins Cook maintains that *You Have Seen Their Faces* was more than just an effort to “vindicate” his fiction; it represented for Caldwell another “[attempt], in a different medium, to explore those aspects of the South that most moved and enraged him” (*Erskine Caldwell and the Fiction of Poverty* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991], 232).

work. According to Goldberg, “Margaret . . . told a reporter that Caldwell ‘didn’t want a woman to do his pictures, most of all he didn’t want me for he thought I didn’t catch the spirit of what he wanted done.’” Bourke-White says she knew, even after the groundwork had been laid for them to collaborate, that Caldwell “did not particularly like my photographs.” But typical of a strong mind set on new challenges, Bourke-White dismissed those concerns: “Well, that didn’t bother me. There were a lot of my pictures that I didn’t like either.”²¹

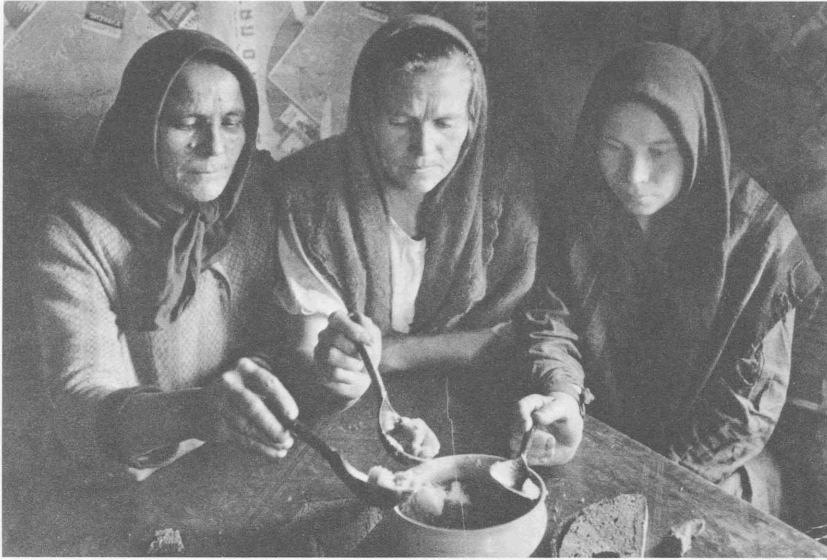
She could not, however, completely disregard Caldwell’s opinion of her. While the partnership had been agreed upon, she did not want to begin with even the slightest lack of confidence on Caldwell’s part; it was too important, personally and professionally, that the work be meaningful and productive to begin at any such deficit. She decided that the way to change Caldwell’s mind was to offer up evidence that she was indeed both capable of the job as he envisioned it and committed to its potential impact; on 20 February 1936, Bourke-White took the first step toward doing just that. She placed an order for a reprint of one of her earlier photographs that she *did* like, with instructions that it be prepared as “A gift from MBW” for “Mr. Erskine Caldwell” (then on an extended vacation with his family in California) and be held for her to sign it and write a “card.”²²

The photograph was a domestic portrait that Bourke-White had taken in 1931 during the second of her three trips to document industrializing Russia, or the effects of the so-called Five-Year Plan, for *Fortune*. Bourke-White says that during these trips she “felt the story of a nation trying to industrialize overnight,” and that most of the photographs she brought back—although they included powerful portraits of Russian workers, peasants, and even Stalin’s great-aunt, as well as landmarks like the Kremlin—finally revealed her subconscious prejudice that “politics was colorless beside the drama of the machine.”²³

21. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 166; Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 115.

22. Order form, 20 February 1936, Erskine Caldwell Collection, Syracuse University Library.

23. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 90–92.



“Three Women Eating” (1931), by Margaret Bourke-White.

Now, however, contemplating her work with Caldwell, among these photographs she found one that seemed particularly capable of conveying her new artistic interests—a quiet study entitled “Three Women Eating,” taken in Russian Georgia and published first (as far as I can tell) in her 1934 limited-edition *Photographs of the U.S.S.R.* In her introduction to that oversize portfolio—significantly, issued the same year of her awakening while chronicling the midwestern drought—Bourke-White writes, “I first went to Soviet Russia because it was the new land of the machine.” Gradually, she says, she came to understand that “it is more than a land of windswept steppes, villages gathered into collective farms, rising factories and growing power dams. Behind the machines stand men and women.”²⁴ Designing a package to secure Caldwell’s confidence, Bourke-White must have hoped that this photograph—

24. Margaret Bourke-White, *Photographs of the U.S.S.R.* (Albany: Argus, 1934), n.p. The photograph is called “Three Women Eating out of One Bowl” on the back of an original print in the Margaret Bourke-White Collection at Syracuse. It is misdated (1932) and called “Borscht” in Sean Callahan’s *The Photographs of Margaret Bourke-White* (New York: New York Graphics Society, 1972), 86.

not one of dams or bridges or even the machinists—would serve as an implicit statement of her ability to take the kind of pictures he wanted. The accompanying note would explicitly affirm her enthusiasm for the project:

Dear Mr. Caldwell:

This is just to tell you that I am happier about the book I am to do with you than anything I have had a chance to work on for the last two years. I have felt keenly for some time that I was turning my camera too often to advertising subjects and too little in the direction of something that might have some social significance.

I am happier about this than I can say! If I had a chance to choose from every living writer in America I would choose you first as the person I would like to do such a book with. And to have you drop out of the clear sky—just when I have decided that I want to take pictures that are closer to life—seems almost too good to be true. . . .

And again—I am looking forward to it so much!

Sincerely,

Margaret Bourke-White²⁵

It was a masterful maneuver. The photograph could not have more perfectly represented the ethos Caldwell knew the images in the new book would have to communicate: serious, humane, and absolutely without melodrama. In addition, the picture's theme—community and sharing as a means of survival—was certainly in line with Caldwell's vision of how the impoverished South, and the nation, would best live through the Depression.²⁶ The writer's response was formal and very brief, a typically qualified thank you:

25. Bourke-White to Caldwell (unsigned copy), 9 March 1936, Erskine Caldwell Collection, Syracuse University Library.

26. A few years earlier, while working as a contract writer at MGM, Caldwell wrote his wife Helen about a sound technician's strike: "I'm siding with the strikers, of course; but I also realize that the individual in the present constituted society has to fight for existence [*sic*]. If he doesn't do it, there's no one just yet to fight for the individual collectively." Erskine Caldwell to Helen Caldwell, 24 July 1933, Erskine Caldwell Collection, Baker Library, Dartmouth College.



Photo taken in 1936 for (but not included in) *You Have Seen Their Faces*.

Dear Margaret Bourke-White:

Merely a note to thank you for the picture you were so good to send to me. It happens to be the first example of your work I have seen that is not a reproduction, and I am more than ever impressed by your style.

Best wishes—
Sincerely,
Erskine Caldwell²⁷

Her “style,” after all, would be fine.

“Three Women Eating” foreshadows the photographs in *You Have Seen Their Faces* as well as much of Bourke-White’s later work. She took what Vicki Goldberg calls a “kind of posed candid shot in which she retained her own control but gave her subjects leave to let theirs go.”²⁸ Aside from its reflection of another side of life in the industrializing Soviet Union, “Three Women Eating” is

27. Caldwell to Bourke-White, 25 March 1936, Erskine Caldwell Collection, Syracuse University Library.

28. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 169.



From *You Have Seen Their Faces* (reproduced with permission of the Estate of Margaret Bourke-White). In this photo from the rural South there are pages from magazines and newspapers on the walls. In “Three Women Eating,” taken in the U.S.S.R., the walls are covered with posters and propaganda from the Revolutionary period. In both cases, popular culture had begun to encroach upon the folk landscape.

significant historically because it cleared doubts and opened the door to a working relationship with Erskine Caldwell during the year Bourke-White later described as “unlike any year I have ever lived through.”²⁹ In their collaboration—which led, of course, to their ill-fated celebrity marriage—Bourke-White credits Caldwell with “introducing [her] to a whole new way of working”:

He had a very quiet, completely receptive approach. He was interested not only in the words a person spoke, but in the mood in which they were spoken. He would wait pa-

29. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 117.



From *You Have Seen Their Faces* (reproduced with permission of the Estate of Margaret Bourke-White).

tiently until the subject had revealed his personality, rather than impose his own personality on the subject, which many of us have a way of doing.

Ironically, her “introduction” to this new way of working was enabled by a portrait taken during a time when she was possessed by the spirit of the machine. Presented to Caldwell as evidence of her heightened consciousness as a photographer, “Three Women Eating” secured Margaret Bourke-White’s transition into the most remarkable phase yet of her career—of a life newly keyed to humanity. As she later put it,

Here with the sharecroppers, I was learning that to understand another human being you must gain some insight into the conditions which made him what he is. . . . I realized that any photographer who tries to portray human be-

ings in a penetrating way must put more heart and mind into his preparation than will ever show in any photograph.³⁰

30. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 125, 134–36.